

**Report on the roundtable “Erosion of the Freedom of Information in Hungary”**  
**Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic 9. 1. 2023, 14:00-16:00**

A roundtable co-organized by the Deputy Speaker of the Czech Chamber of Deputies Olga Richterová and the European Values Center for Security Policy under the auspices of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský and the honourable Speaker Markéta Pekarová Adamová addressed the alarming state of freedom of the Hungarian information space. Following an earlier roundtable organised by Mrs. Richterová in the Chamber of Deputies in June 2022, its main goal was to raise awareness about pressures on independent journalism and the gradual creation of an information monopoly by the regime of Viktor Orbán. Media control fits within the context of polarisation and democratic backsliding in Hungary and the wider region. The list of attendees comprised ambassadors and diplomats (including Hungarian embassy representatives), MPs and Senators, directors from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NGO representatives, Czech and foreign journalists (including the New York Times and Bloomberg) and other experts in the field.

[Olga Richterová](#) opened the roundtable by addressing the fact that Hungary is Czech Republic's close neighbour, a member of the same international structures, and a country we care for. This makes the worrying state of the freedom of information in Hungary a matter of great importance to Czechia. She recalled her recent visit to Budapest, where she had the opportunity to speak with several journalists, learning troubling facts about the state of democracy and freedom in Hungary. While emphasizing the importance of independent media for any democracy, she opened the floor for further presentations and discussion with a summary of the state of the media in Hungary:

1. **About 2/3 of the Hungarian media is under direct or indirect political control** by the ruling Fidesz party. Independent media outlets are under political pressure, smear campaigns, or sometimes even shut down.
2. There is **no real political debate (with the opposition participating and questioning the coalition)** in any pro-government media outlet in Hungary. Prime minister Orbán has not taken part in a genuine political debate, precisely in any TV debate before the election, since the 2006 parliamentary elections. He organises a press conference with the presence of independent journalists once a year only, rarely answering any questions he perceives as voicing criticism.
3. **Opposition parties had very little space in the state-controlled media pre-elections (5 minutes only on state TV** for each party before the 2022 and 2018 parliamentary voting).

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic **Jan Lipavský** spoke next, reminding the audience about the deep and disturbing decline in freedom of media worldwide and its impact on European democracies - including Hungary. He noted that the Czech Republic as an EU member state fully supports the founding values of the organisation, including the rule of law. The Czech Republic's EU Presidency reflected this as one of the five priorities: Resilience of democratic institutions. Mr. Lipavský also noted the decision of the EU during the Czech Presidency to temporarily freeze 55 percent of payments appropriated from

cohesion policy operational programs and the conditioned approval of the Hungarian National Recovery Plan. In conclusion, however, he called for acting in a principled, yet careful way, to avoid the risk of further radicalising Hungarian positions.

Speaker of the House, **Markéta Pekarová Adamová**, confirmed that the freedom of information is one of the most important features of a well-functioning democracy. She also warned of the gradual erosion of information freedom under Viktor Orbán, who severely limited the information space without people immediately noticing. In such a system, freedom of speech is not limited as such, but the information space is shrinking with restricted access to information. She concluded by saying that the situation in Hungary might not be as extreme as in Russia, but the trajectory is troublesome.

The first presenter was Dr. **Václav Štětka**, media sociologist from Loughborough University in the UK. He presented the results of his long-term research of the relationship between illiberalism in Central Europe and the media. Asking what lessons may we learn from the Hungarian scenario, he put the case into the broader perspective of democratic backsliding in Central Europe. He classified Hungary as a hybrid regime, which maintains elementary features of democracy (competitive elections), while significantly shattering its other pillars (such as rule of law and the system of checks and balances). He further presented his data showing a clear link between the consumption of pro-government media in several Central European countries, and illiberal attitudes of their audiences. In conclusion, Dr. Štětka summed up the impact of illiberal media capture in Hungary by emphasising increased polarisation and declining trust in media. In his view, the story of Hungarian media shows the fragility of a post-transformation media system.

**Pablo Gorondi**, managing editor of the Hungarian desk at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, held that Viktor Orbán`s regime is constantly putting pressure on opposition media, while changing the whole structure of the media system in Hungary. He cited many examples, such as nearly 500 media outlets being donated to one pro-government organization (KESMA); the Fidesz government spending ca. €160 mil. a year on media advertising, most of which goes to pro-government media outlets; or the politically-appointed and powerful Media Council with unusually long 9-year terms. As the biggest change, Mr. Gorondi identified the establishment of the aforementioned Central European Media Foundation (KESMA), which controls the media market in Hungary. He shared that corruption scandals of state officials never make it into the state media broadcasting. State-backed media promotes Fidesz government policies. While physical violence against journalists has yet to be committed, independent journalists have a very hard time getting public information from the authorities. One of the typical answers of Viktor Orbán, on why he rarely speaks to independent journalists, is: "I don't talk with fake news."

**Szabolcs Panyi**, who joined the round table online, is a Hungarian investigative journalist working for Direkt36, a Hungarian non-profit investigative journalist platform. He gained notoriety for investigating the Pegasus affair in which Orbán`s regime used spyware to spy on its citizens, including independent journalists like Panyi. He further confirmed that journalists are not being killed, harassed or intimidated in the streets of Hungary like in Russia or Mexico; however, the red line has been crossed with the country surveilling its own

citizens. He confirmed that some independent journalists like his outlet are not invited to state press conferences and are being targeted with smear campaigns as agents of the U.S. and George Soros. He also warned of Hungary and Russia's warm relations, relating the very unbalanced, pro-Russian portrayal of Putin's war on Ukraine in pro-government Hungarian media.

Slovak-Hungarian investigative journalists **Karin Kövarty Sólymos** and **Márk Finta** spoke about the Fidesz government's expansion of influence throughout the Hungarian community in Slovakia (and other neighbouring states). Regional media aimed at Hungarian minorities, such as MA7, are operating with the financial support directly from the Hungarian government and are providing a large space for local Fidesz-backed politicians. These platforms are fully adopting and propagating the narratives used by the Orbán government - including on the war in Ukraine. No critical voices or questions are raised in their content towards the Hungarian government.

A lively debate followed the presentations as to what can be done to improve the situation of independent journalism in Hungary. Olga Richterová (MP) stressed the need to raise awareness and warn against possible spillover effects. In this context, Andrea Michalcová from the European Values (an NGO) warned that Slovakia is just a small step away from becoming another Hungary. Senator David Smoljak mentioned his recent visit to Budapest with the Senate media committee, where he was told that there were no independent media in Hungary - all media are either pro-government or anti-government, he was told. This attitude of pro-government representatives further underpins the polarisation of Hungarian society. Dr. Štětka warned that one of the features of polarisation is that people are losing sensitivity towards democratic values, including the role of independent media, which in turn makes it easier for the government or other actors to capture them. Near the end of the event, New York Times journalist Andrew Higgins asked the panel why has the U.S. become the bogeyman in Hungary? Mr. Payni replied that it first started with Orbán government's narrative accusing Hungarian opposition and opposition media of being funded by the U.S. and George Soros. Later, as Orbán became closer to Vladimir Putin, his anti-American rhetoric in public grew.

For more details, an audio recording of the event will be made available.